Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

JUNE 1953
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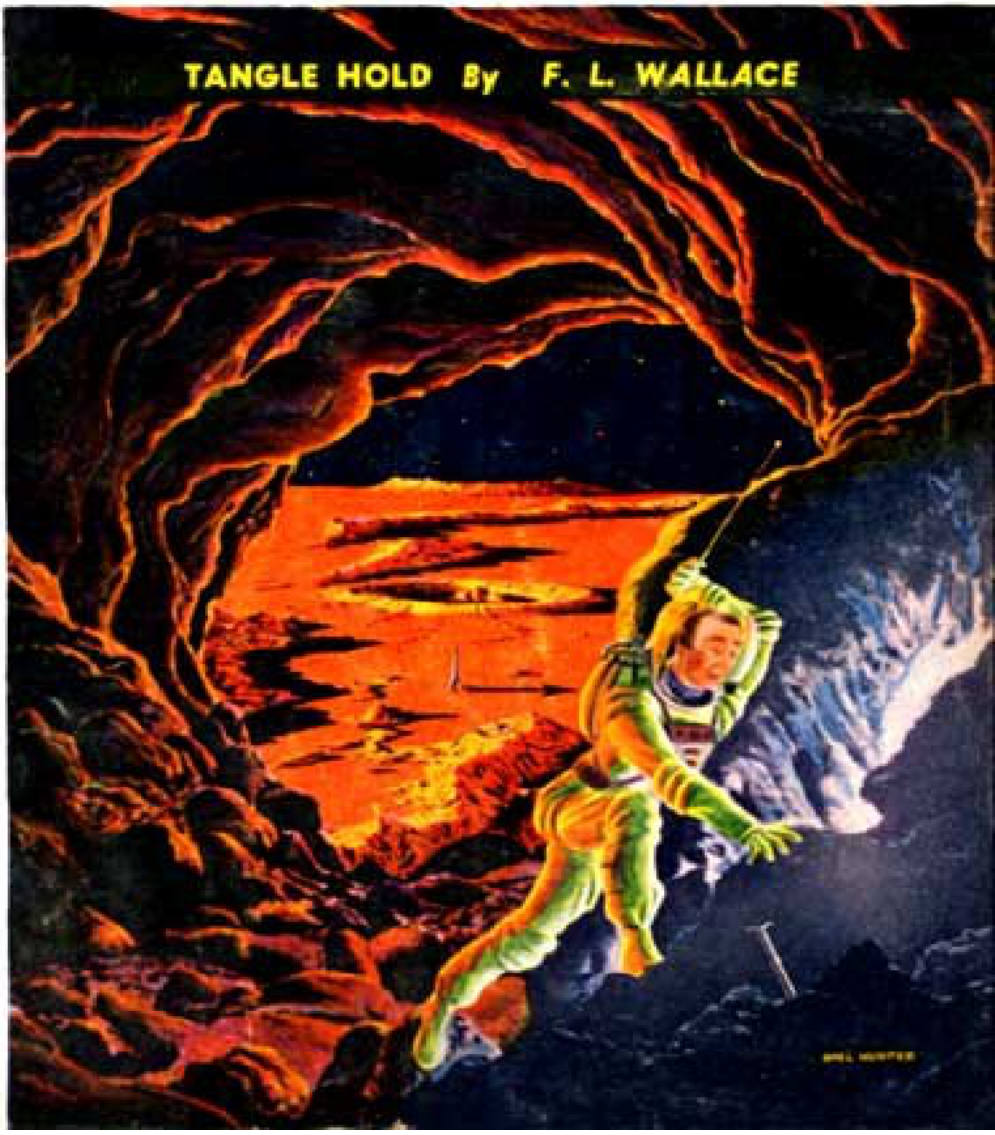

The Water Eater

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Published: 1953

Type(s): Short Fiction, Science Fiction
Source: http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/31841

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I just lost a weekend. I ain't too anxious to find it. Instead, I sure wish I had gone fishing with McCarthy and the boys like I'd planned.

I drive a beer truck for a living, but here it is almost noon Monday and I haven't turned a wheel. Sure, I get beer wholesale, and I have been known to take some advantage of my discount. But that wasn't what happened to this weekend.

Instead of fishing or bowling or poker or taking the kids down to the amusement park over Saturday and Sunday, I've been losing sleep over an experiment.

Down at the Elks' Club, the boys say that for a working stiff I have a very inquiring mind. I guess that's because they always see me reading *Popular Science* and *Scientific American* and such, instead of heading for the stack of *Esquires* that are piled a foot deep in the middle of the big table in the reading room, like the rest of them do.

Well, it was my inquiring mind that lost me my wife, the skin of my right hand, a lot of fun and sleep—yeah, not a wink of sleep for two days now! Which is the main reason I'm writing this down now. I've read somewheres that if you wrote down your troubles, you could get them out of your system.

I thought I had troubles Friday night when I pulled into the driveway and Lottie yelled at me from the porch, "The fire's out! And it's flooded. Hurry up!"

Trouble, hah! That was just the beginning.

Lottie is as cute a little ex-waitress as ever flipped the suds off a glass of beer, but she just ain't mechanically minded. The day Uncle Alphonse died and left us $2500 and I went out and bought a kitchen and shed full of appliances for her, that was a sad day, all right. She has lived a fearful life ever since, too proud of her dishwasher and automatic this and that to consider selling them, but scared stiff of the noises they make and the vibrations and all the mysterious dials and lights, etc.

So this Friday afternoon when the oil-burner blew out from the high wind, she got terrified, sent the kids over to their grandmother's in a cab and sat for two hours trying to make up her mind whether to call the fire department or the plumber.

Meanwhile, this blasted oil stove was overflowing into the fire pot.

"Well, turn it off!" I yelled. "I'll be in right away!"

I ducked into the garage and got a big handful of rags and a hunk of

string and a short stick. This I have been through before. I went in and kissed her pretty white face, and a couple of worry lines disappeared.

"Get me a pan or something," I said and started dismantling the front of the heater.

These gravity-flow oil heaters weren't built to make it easy to drain off excess oil. There's a brass plug at the inlet, but no one in history has been able to stir one, the oil man told me. I weigh 200 pounds stripped, but all I ever did was ruin a tool trying.

The only way to get out the oil was to open the front, stuff rags down through the narrow fire slot, sop up the stuff and fish out the rags with the string tied around one end of the bundle. Then you wring out the rags with your bare hands into a pan.

"Hey, Lottie," I yelled, "this is your roaster! It'll be hard to clean out the oil smell!"

But, of course, it was too late. I had squeezed a half-pint of oil into it already. So I went on dunking and wringing and thinking how lousy my cigarettes were going to taste all evening and feeling glad that I delivered beer instead of oil for a living.

I got the stove bailed out and lit with only one serious blast of soot out the "Light Here" hole. Then I dumped the oil out in the alley and set the roaster pan in the sink. Lottie was peeling potatoes for dinner, and she snuggled her yellow curls on my shoulder kind of apologetically for the mess she had caused me. I scrubbed the soot and oil off my hands and told her it was all right, only next time, for gosh sakes, please turn the stove off at least.

The water I was splashing into the roaster gathered up in little shrinking drops and reminded me that the pig-hocks I brought home for Sunday dinner were going to rate throwing out unless we got the oil smell out of the pan.

"Tell you what you do," I said to Lottie. "Get me all your cleaning soaps and stuff and let's see what we got."

Lottie is always trying out some new handy-dandy little kitchen helper compound, so she hefted up quite an armload. Now, when I was in high school, I really liked chemistry. "Charlie, Boy Scientist," my pals used to sneer at me. But I was pretty good at it, and I been reading the science magazines right along ever since. So I know what a detergent is supposed to do, and all about how soaps act, and stuff that most people take the advertisers' word for.

"This one," I told Lottie, "has a lot of caustic in it, see?"

She nodded and said that's the one that ruined her aluminum coffee pot. She remembered it specially.

I poured some very hot tap water into the roaster and shook in the strong soap powder. "This is to saponify the oil," I explained.

"What's saponify?" Lottie asked.

"That means to make soap. Soap is mainly a mixture of some caustic with fat or oil. It makes sudsy soap."

"But we got soap," she said. "Why don't you just use the soap we got?"

We went into the business of soap-making pretty deep. Meanwhile, I read some more labels and added pinches of this and that detergent and a few squirts of liquid "wonder-cleaners" that didn't say what was in them.

In her crisp Scotch way, Lottie got across to me that she thought I was wasting soap powder and my time and cluttering up the sink while she was busy there, so I wound up with half a cup of Doozey soap flakes, filled the pan to the brim and set the concoction at the back of the drain board to do its business.

When dinner was over, I was in the living room reading the paper when I heard Lottie muttering at the sink. Lottie doesn't usually mutter, so I went out to see what was wrong.

"Nice mess," she said and pointed at the roaster. The stuff had cooled and jelled into a half-solid condition.

"Hah!" I said. "We had a supersaturated solution. When it cooled off, it coagulated."

Lottie scowled. It makes her nervous when I use big words which I only do when I'm talking about chemistry and the like.

"Well, uncoogalate it and dump it out of my roaster," she told me.

My scientific inquiring mind was stirred as I lifted the pan over to the table under the center light. We had here a gelatin of various cleaners, and every one of them claiming to be best ever. What would this new combination do?

I grabbed a pan off the stove that had a mess of scorched carrot leavings in the bottom. Lottie had been soaking it with about a half inch of water. As I reached for a tablespoon, Lottie objected. "Look, now, if you are going to start another *experiment*, dump that mess out first and let me work on the roaster."

I saved about a cupful of the slimy gunk and she went back to her

dishes.

"You'll be sorry," I said under my breath, "if this turns out to be the only batch of the finest cleaner in the whole world. And us with only a cupful."

A minute later, I was glad she hadn't heard me. When I dropped a little glob of the stuff into the carrot pan and stirred it around a bit, instead of dissolving and diluting in the extra water, the mixture seemed to stay the same density after swallowing up the water.

"Give me a pie tin," I demanded.

Lottie sighed, but she got a shallow pan out of the pantry and handed it to me. Then I poured the jelly out of the carrot pan and I made my first important discovery.

The stuff was not good for cleaning out scorched carrots.

The pot was bone-dry. So were the carrots. They had a desiccated look and were stuck worse than ever to the bottom. I brushed them with my finger and the top layers powdered to dust. Then I noticed that not a droplet or smidgin of the jelly remained in the pot. When I had poured it out, it had gone out all at the same time, as if it was trying to hang together.

The carbonized carrots at the very bottom were hard and dry, too. A scrape job if I ever saw one.

The pie tin was now full almost to the rim. The globby stuff sort of rolled around, trying to find a flat condition, which it finally did. The motion was not as startling as the sudden quiet that settled over the surface after a last ripple.

The stuff looked like it was waiting.

The temptation was worse than a park bench labeled "wet paint," so I stuck my finger in it. Right in the middle of it.

A ripple flashed out from the center like when you drop a pebble in a pool, and the ripple hit the brim and converged back to my finger. When it hit, the surface climbed up my finger about an eighth of an inch. Another ripple, another eighth of an inch, and about now I felt something like a gentle sucking sensation. Also, another feeling I can only tell you was "unclammy."

I jerked away fast and shook my finger hard over the pan, but it wasn't necessary. None of the stuff had stayed with me. In fact, my finger was dry—powdery dry!

Then I got the feeling that someone was staring over my shoulder.

There was. It was Lottie, and she had a look of horror on her face that didn't help my nerves a bit.

"Get rid of it, Charlie!" she cried. "Get rid of it! Please throw it out!"

"Now, now, honey," I said. "It ain't alive."

"It is!" she insisted.

Lottie chatters quite a bit and pretty well speaks her mind. But she doesn't go around making assertions. When she does come out flat-footed with a serious statement, it is always from the bottom of her 22-carat womanly intuition, and she is practically always right.

"How could it be alive?" I argued. I often argue when I know I'm wrong. This time I argued because I wanted to wipe that awful look off my wife's face. "Come on in the living room and relax," I said.

And then sweet-natured, honey-haired little Lottie did a violent thing. Still staring over my shoulder at the pie tin, she screamed wide-open and ran out of the house. A second later, I heard her start the car out the driveway at 30 miles an hour in reverse. She burned rubber out in front and was gone.

I hadn't moved an inch. Because when she screamed, I looked back at the jelly to see why, and the stuff had oozed over the edge and was flowing slowly toward me.

I know a little about Korzybski and how he wanted everybody to make what he called a cortico-thalamic pause whenever they get scared as hell. So I was making this cortico-thalamic pause, which is really counting to ten before you do anything, while Lottie was leaving the house. When I got through with my pause, I jumped backward over my kitchen chair so hard that I must have knocked my head on the tile sink-board.

When I came to, it was after midnight. The kitchen light was still on. Lottie was still gone. I knew it. If she was here, she'd have had me in bed. No matter how much of my employer's product I have sampled, never has Lottie let me sleep it off on the kitchen floor. Her 110 pounds is a match for my 200 in more ways than one, and she takes good care of her man.

Then I realized that this was not a stag beer-bust. There was something about a pot of soap-jelly.

It was still there. A long slug of the half-transparent stuff had strung down off the edge of the table and still hung there like a nasty-looking icicle.

The knob on the back of my head throbbed so much that at first I

couldn't figure what was wrong with the air. Then my aching dry throat told me what the matter was. The air was dry like the summer we spent at a dude ranch in Arizona. It made my nostrils crimp, and my tongue felt like a mouthful of wrinkled pepperoni.

When I got to my feet and looked at the top of the kitchen table, I almost panicked again. But this time the pause worked and I got better results.

Alive or dead, the gunk was the most powerful desiccant I'd ever heard of. It had drunk up the water in the carrot pot, sucked the surface moisture from my finger and then spent the past few hours feeding on the humidity in the air.

It was thirsty. Like alcohol has affinity for water, this stuff was the same way, only more so. In fact, it even reached out toward anything that had water in it—like me.

That's why it had oozed over the pan the way it did.

What's so frightening about that, I asked myself. Plants grow toward water.

But plants are alive!

That's what Lottie had said—before she screamed.

"So you're thirsty?" I asked it out loud. "Okay, we'll give you a *real* drink!"

I got a bucket from the service porch and took the pancake turner to scrape the gooey nightmare into it. I even caught the drip off the edge, and it seemed quietly grateful to sink back to the parent glob in the pail, which by now amounted to about a quart.

I set the pail in the laundry tray and turned on the faucet hard. In about a second and a half, I almost sprained my wrist turning it off. Not only did the jelly drink up the water without dissolving, but it started creeping up the stream in a column about three inches in diameter, with the water pouring down its middle.

When I got the water shut off, the unholy jelly-spout slopped back disappointedly.

And now the bucket was over half full of the stuff.

I dropped in an ice-cube as an experiment. It didn't even splash. The surface pulled away, letting the cube make a pretty good dent in it, but then only gradually did the displaced goo creep back around it as if to sample it cautiously.

I couldn't stand the dry air any more, so I threw open the doors and

windows and let the cool, damp night air come in. The ice-cube had disappeared without even a surface puddle. Now, as the humidity came back, I thought I noticed a restless shimmering in the jelly.

The phone rang. It was Lottie's mother wanting to know why Lottie had come over there in hysterics, and where had I been since seven o'clock. I don't remember what I answered, but it served the purpose. Lottie hasn't returned and they haven't called up any more.

When I returned to the bucket, it seemed that the stuff was deeper yet, but I couldn't tell because I hadn't marked the level. I got Lottie's fever thermometer out of the medicine chest and took the jelly's temperature. It read 58 degrees F. The wall thermometer read 58 degrees, too. Room temperature, with the windows open. What kind of "life" could this be that had no temperature of its own?

But then what kind of a fancy-pants metabolism could you expect out of an organism that fed on nothing but Lake Michigan water, right out of the reservoir?

I got a pencil and notebook out of Lottie's neat little desk and started making notes.

I wondered about the density of the stuff. Ice floated in it and the bucket seemed heavy. I broke the thermometer and tapped a drop of mercury onto the restless surface. The droplet sank slowly to the bottom with no apparent effect either way.

Heavier than water. Lighter than mercury.

I took a beer out of the refrigerator and swallowed it. The last drops I sprinkled into the pail. The drippings sizzled across the surface until only a fine dust was left. A tiny ripple flipped this dust over to the edge of the pail as if clearing the thirsty decks for action. But this drew my eyes to the rim of the liquid. There was no meniscus, either up or down.

Remembering back, I figured this meant there was no surface tension, which reminded me that part of this mixture was made of detergent.

But had I created a new form of life? Like Lottie said, was it really alive? Certainly it could reproduce itself. It had brains enough to know the direction of more water, like when it took off after me on the table.

Not long ago, there was this important physicist who wrote about how life probably got started away back when the Earth was just forming. He argued that special creation was more or less a lot of

hogwash, and that what actually took place was that as the Earth cooled, all the hot chemicals mixing around sort of stumbled onto a combination or two that took on the first characteristics of life.

In other words, this guy left off where Mr. Darwin began his theory of evolution.

Now me, I don't know. Lottie makes me go to church with the kids every Sunday and I like it. If this chemical theory about life getting started is right—well, then, a lot of people got the wrong idea about things, I always figured.

But how would I or this physicist explain this quivering mess of protoplasm I got on my hands by accident this particular Friday night?

I experimented some more. I got out the kids' junior encyclopedia and looked up some things I'd forgot, and some I had never learned in the first place.

So it got to be Saturday morning. Fred and Claude phoned about the fishing trip and I made an excuse. No one else bothered me. All day Saturday, I studied. And all Saturday night and Sunday. But I couldn't figure out any sensible answers that would make peace with my minister.

It looked like I had created some form of life. Either that or some life-form in the stove oil that had been asleep a billion years had suddenly found a condition to its liking and had decided to give up hibernating in favor of reproduction.

What drove me on was the thought that I must have something here that was commercially important—a new culture of something that would revolutionize some branch of chemistry or biology. I wouldn't even stop to fry an egg. I chewed up some crackers and drank a few more bottles of beer when my stomach got too noisy. I wasn't sleepy, although my eyes felt like they were pushed four inches into my skull.

Junior's little chemistry set didn't tell me very much when I made the few tests I knew how. Litmus paper remained either red or blue when stuck into the jelly. This surprised me a little because this whole mass of de-sudsed washing compound mixture had started out with a pretty good shot of lye in it.

So my notes grew, but my useful information didn't. By midnight Sunday, it appeared that my jelly invention had only one important talent: The ability to drink endlessly anything containing water. And only the water was used, it seemed. Dissolved solids were cast aside in the form of variously colored dusts.

By now, the goop had outgrown the pail and was two-thirds up in the laundry tub. A slow drip from the faucet kept the surface of my monster in a constant state of frenzy, like feeding a rumpot beer by the thimbleful.

It was fascinating to watch the little curleycues of jelly flip up after each drop, reaching for more, and then falling back with a cranky little lash.

At two o'clock this morning, I began to get a little sense in me. Or maybe it was just the fear finally catching up again.

There was danger here.

I was too fuzzy to know exactly what the danger was, but I began to develop a husky hate for the whole project.

"Kill it!" came into my mind. "Get rid of it, Charlie!"

Lottie's scream shrilled back into my ears, and this command became very important to me. I became angry.

"Want a drink, do you?" I shouted out loud. I put on the tea kettle and when it was to full steam, I took it back to the tub. "I'll give you a drink with a kick in it!"

What happened, I would like to forget. Ten times as fast as it had climbed up the cold water spout, it ran up the boiling water stream, into the tea kettle, blew off the lid and swarmed over my hand with a scalding-dry slither that made me drop the kettle into the tub and scream with pain.

The jelly steamed and stuck to my flesh long enough to sear it half to the bone. Then it slopped back with the rest and left me grabbing my wrist and tearing at the flesh with my finger-nails to stop the pain.

Then I got insane mad. I got my big blowtorch I use for peeling paint, and I lit it and pumped it up as high as it would go and aimed it down into that tub.

Not too much happened. The jelly shrank away from the roaring blast, but it didn't climb over the edge of the tub. It shrank some more and I poured the flame on.

It didn't burn. It just got to be less and less, and what was left began to get cloudy. And when I hit the bottom of the tub, the last glob moved around pretty active, trying to escape the heat, but I got it. Every damned last shred of it, and I was laughing and crying when I dropped the torch into the tub. I had been holding it with my scalded hand and I guess I fainted.

I wasn't out long. I got up and dressed my hand with lard, and it felt pretty good. Took a couple of aspirins and sat down at Lottie's typewriter. I know I won't sleep until I get this off my mind in about the way it happened, because I probably won't believe all of it myself when I get back to normal.

I just now went out and fished the blowtorch out of the laundry tub. All there was left in the bottom of the tub was maybe half a pound of singed-looking—soap flakes?

There, I've finished writing this all down. But I'm still not sleepy. I'm not worried about patching things up with Lottie. She's the most wonderful, understanding wife a guy ever had.

My hand feels real good now. I got it wrapped in lard and gauze, and I could drive the truck if I wanted to.

I'm not afraid of getting fired or bawled out for not coming to work on time this morning.

No, the reason I haven't turned a wheel on my beer truck today is something else.

Friday night, when Lottie wanted to wash the roaster, I saved only a cup of the jelly for my experiments. The rest she washed down the drain.

The sewer empties into Lake Michigan.

The brewery where I load up is right on the shore of Lake Michigan.

I'm afraid to drive down there and look.

—WIN MARKS

Also available on Feedbooks

A Midsummer Night's Dream, *William Shakespeare*

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a romantic comedy by William Shakespeare, suggested by "The Knight's Tale" from Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, written around 1594 to 1596. It portrays the adventures of four young Athenian lovers and a group of amateur actors, their interactions with the Duke and Duchess of Athens, Theseus and Hippolyta, and with the fairies who inhabit a moonlit forest. The play is one of Shakespeare's most popular works for the stage and is widely performed across the world.

Captain Blood, *Rafael Sabatini*

A gentlemanly Irish physician is innocently condemned to a life of slavery in the English colonies across the sea. There, on a Caribbean Island plantation, the good Dr. Peter Blood, toils as a slave. A chance raid by Spaniards affords Blood his opportunity to escape into a life of piracy and crime upon the high seas. But Blood is a pirate with a sense of honor. How Blood distinguishes himself against his enemies, is the tale in this enjoyable historical adventure.

A Tale of Two Cities, *Charles Dickens*

A Tale of Two Cities (1859) is the second historical novel by Charles Dickens, set in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution. It depicts the plight of the French proletariat under the brutal oppression of the French aristocracy in the years leading up to the revolution, and the corresponding savage brutality demonstrated by the revolutionaries toward the former aristocrats in the early years of the revolution. It follows the lives of several protagonists through these events, most notably Charles Darnay, a French once-aristocrat who falls victim to the indiscriminate wrath of the revolution despite his virtuous nature, and Sydney Carton, a dissipated English barrister who endeavours to redeem his ill-spent life out of love for Darnay's wife, Lucie Manette.

Macbeth, *William Shakespeare*

Macbeth is among the best-known of William Shakespeare's plays, and is his shortest tragedy, believed to have been written between 1603 and 1606. It is frequently performed at both amateur and professional levels, and has been adapted for opera, film, books, stage and screen. Often regarded as archetypal, the play tells of the dangers

of the lust for power and the betrayal of friends. For the plot Shakespeare drew loosely on the historical account of King Macbeth of Scotland by Raphael Holinshed and that by the Scottish philosopher Hector Boece. There are many superstitions centred on the belief the play is somehow "cursed", and many actors will not mention the name of the play aloud, referring to it instead as "The Scottish play". (From Wikipedia)

Sister Carrie, *Theodore Dreiser*

Sister Carrie (1900) is a novel by Theodore Dreiser about a young country girl who moves to the big city where she starts realizing her own American Dream by first becoming a mistress to men that she perceives as superior and later as a famous actress.

Cabbages and Kings, *O. Henry*

A series of stories which each explore some individual aspect of life in a paralytically sleepy Central American town while each advancing some aspect of the larger plot and relating back one to another in a complex structure which slowly explicates its own background even as it painstakingly erects a town which is one of the most detailed literary creations of the period.
In this book, O. Henry coined the term "banana republic".

On the Origin of Species, 6th Edition, *Charles Darwin*

Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species, in which he writes of his theories of evolution by natural selection, is one of the most important works of scientific study ever published.

Fantômas, *Marcel Allain*

Fantômas was introduced a few years after Arsène Lupin, another well-known thief. But whereas Lupin draws the line at murder, Fantômas has no such qualms and is shown as a sociopath who enjoys killing in a sadistic fashion.
He is totally ruthless, gives no mercy, and is loyal to none, not even his own children. He is a master of disguise, always appearing under an assumed identity, often that of a person whom he has murdered. Fantômas makes use of bizarre and improbable techniques in his crimes, such as plague-infested rats, giant snakes, and rooms that fill with sand.

Maggie, a Girl of the Street, *Stephen Crane*

Regarded as the first work of unalloyed naturalism in American fiction.
The story of Maggie Johnson a young woman who, seduced by her brother's friend and then disowned by her family, turns to prostitution.

A Voyage to Arcturus, *David Lindsay*

A stunning achievement in speculative fiction, A Voyage to Arcturus has inspired, enchanted, and unsettled readers for decades. It is simultaneously an epic quest across one of the most unusual and brilliantly depicted alien worlds ever conceived, a profoundly moving journey of discovery into the metaphysical heart of the universe, and a shockingly intimate excursion into what makes us human and unique.

After a strange interstellar journey, Maskull, a man from Earth, awakens alone in a desert on the planet Tormance, seared by the suns of the binary star Arcturus. As he journeys northward, guided by a drumbeat, he encounters a world and its inhabitants like no other, where gender is a victory won at dear cost; where landscape and emotion are drawn into an accursed dance; where heroes are killed, reborn, and renamed; and where the cosmological lures of Shaping, who may be God, torment Maskull in his astonishing pilgrimage. At the end of his arduous and increasingly mystical quest waits a dark secret and an unforgettable revelation.

A Voyage to Arcturus was the first novel by writer David Lindsay (1878–1945), and it remains one of the most revered classics of science fiction.

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Food for the mind

Table of Contents

Title
About
Recommendations